Before You Read the Poem

Build Background
Tell students that the following poem is about Hiawatha, a Native American tribal leader, and invite students to share what they know about him. In your discussion, include the following information: In the 1400s, Native American tribes in the Northeast had been engaged in intertribal warfare for decades. Hiawatha helped to stop the fighting by founding the Iroquois League. His stature as a leader is legendary. Longfellow’s poem, “Hiawatha’s Childhood,” has contributed to the mythic character of the stories that surround him.

Build Vocabulary
Explain the following vocabulary to students:

- **brakes**: thickets
- **dusk**: the time of day right before and after sunset
- **ere**: before
- **fretful wail**: a high-pitched crying sound
- **linden cradle**: a cradle made out of wood from the linden tree
- **lull**: to calm a baby to sleep
- **perish**: wither and die
- **plumes**: feathers
- **reindeer sinews**: the tendons of reindeer, which were used as thread
- **rushes**: tall reeds
- **tresses**: braids or locks of hair
- **wigwam**: This word is from the Abenaki tribe. It refers to the round or oval bark-covered dwellings that were typical of Native Americans living in the Northeast. Settlers used this term to describe any Native American dwelling, and it is now considered to be pejorative.

While You Read the Poem
Ask for four volunteers to take the roles of narrator, Hiawatha, Nokomis, and the forces of nature (the pine tree and water). Prompt each student to read his or her lines at the appropriate time.

After You Read the Poem

Elements of Poetry

**Form: Narrative Verse** This poem, like the others in this unit, is a narrative—it tells a story. As you read the poem aloud with students, pause at the end of each stanza and have students summarize what has happened.

**Poet’s Toolbox: Contractions** In order to achieve the desired number of syllables in a given line, poets sometimes contract a word using an apostrophe, thereby shortening the word by one syllable. As you read, ask students to look for the words ’Tis and whene’er. These are abbreviations for It is and whenever.

**Follow-up Activities**
Students may work independently to complete the activities on pages 116 and 117.
Hiawatha’s Childhood

1 By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
   By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
   Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
   Daugher of the Moon, Nokomis.
   Dark behind it rose the forest,
   Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
   Rose the firs with cones upon them;
   Bright before it beat the water,
   Beat the clear and sunny water,
   Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

2 There the wrinkled old Nokomis
   Nursed the little Hiawatha,
   Rocked him in his linden cradle,
   Bedded soft in moss and rushes,
   Safely bound with reindeer sinews;
   Stilled his fretful wail by saying,
   “Hush! the Naked Bear will hear thee!”
   Lulled him into slumber, singing,
   “Ewa-yea! my little owlet!
   Who is this, that lights the wigwam?
   With his great eyes lights the wigwam?
   Ewa-yea! my little owlet!”
Many things Nokomis taught him
Of the stars that shine in heaven;
Showed him Ishkoodah, the comet,
Ishkoodah, with fiery tresses;
Showed the Death-Dance of the spirits,
Warriors with their plumes and war-clubs,
Flaring far away to northward
In the frosty nights of winter;
Showed the broad white road in heaven,
Pathway of the ghosts, the shadows,
Running straight across the heavens,
Crowded with the ghosts, the shadows.

At the door on summer evenings,
Sat the little Hiawatha;
Heard the whispering of the pine-trees,
Heard the lapping of the waters,
Sounds of music, words of wonder;
“Minne-wawa!” said the pine-trees,
“Mudway-aushka!” said the water.

Saw the fire-fly Wah-wah-taysee,
Flitting through the dusk of evening,
With the twinkle of its candle
Lighting up the brakes and bushes,
And he sang the song of children,
Sang the song Nokomis taught him:
“Wah-wah-taysee, little fire-fly,
Little flitting, white-fire insect,
Little, dancing, white-fire creature,
Light me with your little candle,
Ere upon my bed I lay me,
Ere in sleep I close my eyelids!”
6 Saw the moon rise from the water,
Rippling, rounding from the water,
Saw the flecks and shadows on it
Whispered, “What is that, Nokomis?”
And the good Nokomis answered:
“Once a warrior, very angry,
Seized his grandmother, and threw her
Up into the sky at midnight;
Right against the moon he threw her;
’Tis her body that you see there.”

7 Saw the rainbow in the heaven,
In the eastern sky the rainbow,
Whispered, “What is that, Nokomis?”
And the good Nokomis answered:
“’Tis the heaven of flowers you see there;
All the wild-flowers of the forest,
All the lilies of the prairie,
When on earth they fade and perish,
Blossom in that heaven above us.”
8 When he heard the owls at midnight,
Hooting, laughing in the forest,
“What is that?” he cried in terror;
“What is that,” he said, “Nokomis?”
And the good Nokomis answered:
“That is but the owl and owlet,
Talking in their native language,
Talking, scolding at each other.”

9 Then the little Hiawatha
Learned of every bird its language,
Learned their names and all their secrets,
How they built their nests in summer,
Where they hid themselves in winter,
Talked with them whene’er he met them,
Called them “Hiawatha’s Chickens.”

10 Of all beasts he learned the language,
Learned their names and all their secrets,
How the beavers built their lodges,
Where the squirrels hid their acorns,
How the reindeer ran so swiftly,
Why the rabbit was so timid,
Talked with them whene’er he met them,
Called them “Hiawatha’s Brothers.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Understanding the Poem

Read each question and choose the best answer. You may wish to reread “Hiawatha’s Childhood” as you work.

1. This poem tells how Nokomis taught Hiawatha _______.
   A to sing songs
   B to be a leader
   C about the world of nature
   D the names of all the people in their village

2. Nokomis was _______.
   A an owl
   B a fire-fly
   C the spirit of the forest
   D a daughter of the moon

3. What is an owlet?
   A a baby owl
   B an owl’s nest
   C the eye of an owl
   D the sound an owl makes

4. Which group of animals is mentioned in the poem?
   A fox, turtle, dove
   B fire-fly, owl, beaver
   C hawk, snake, raven
   D eagle, wolf, bear

5. This poem makes you think that Hiawatha _______.
   A disliked nature
   B was a bit of a bully
   C had a hard time controlling his temper
   D was more than an ordinary human being
Understanding the Poem

This poem tells about the childhood of Hiawatha. Each stanza tells about a different part of the story. Answer each question in your own words. When you are finished, you will have a summary of the poem.

First Stanza: Where was Hiawatha born and what was it like?

Second Stanza: What did Nokomis do to comfort little Hiawatha?

Third Stanza: What kinds of things did Nokomis teach Hiawatha?

Fourth Stanza: When Hiawatha sat by the door of the wigwam for the first time, what did he hear?

Fifth Stanza: What kind of insect did he see, and what did he ask it?

Sixth Stanza: What did Nokomis tell Hiawatha about the moon?

Seventh Stanza: What did Nokomis say about rainbows?

Eighth Stanza: What did she say about the owls hooting at night?

Ninth and Tenth Stanzas: What did Hiawatha do after he heard that?
Page 110
Answers will vary, but should correspond to this:

**Beginning**
The Pedlar was traveling down a country road and he came upon Robin Hood and Little John. Robin Hood asked the Pedlar what he had in the bag, and he told him that he had some silk. Robin Hood asked for the silk, and the Pedlar refused to give it to him.

**Middle**
The Pedlar fought with Little John until Little John got tired out. Then Robin Hood took over. He got tired, too. He wondered who the Pedlar was, so he asked him. They figured out that they were cousins.

**End**
Robin Hood and the Pedlar stopped fighting and went to a tavern where they all ate and drank as friends.

**Hiawatha’s Childhood**

Page 116
1. C—about the world of nature
2. D—a daughter of the moon
3. A—a baby owl
4. B—fire-fly, owl, beaver
5. D—was more than an ordinary human being

Page 117
He was born on the shore of a lake. Nearby was a dark forest.
She sang him lullabies and rocked him to sleep.
She taught him about the stars and spirits of the night.
He heard the sound of wind in the trees and lapping water.
He saw a fire-fly, and asked it to light up the wigwam.
She said that a warrior threw his grandmother up against the moon, and that we can still see her shadow there today.
She said that all flowers blossom in heaven when they die on earth.
She said that they were scolding each other.
He decided to learn the language of birds and all the other animals.

**A Visit from St. Nicholas**

Page 122
1. C—a father who catches a glimpse of St. Nicholas
2. D—in the middle of the night
3. B—reindeer
4. C—filled the stockings
5. B—went to another house

Page 123
1. 1. Everybody goes to bed.
2. 2. Papa hears a loud noise outside.
3. 3. The reindeer land on the roof.
4. 4. St. Nicholas comes down the chimney.
5. 5. Papa watches St. Nick fill the stockings.
6. 6. After he goes back up the chimney, St. Nick drives away on his sleigh.

2. a. St. Nick’s nose was as red as a cherry.
b. His cheeks were like roses.
c. His mouth was like a bow.
d. Smoke circled his head like a wreath.
e. The beard of his chin was as white as snow.
f. When he laughed, his belly shook like a bowl full of jelly.

3. Answers will vary. Possible answers include:
a. The night was as dark as coal.
b. The stars twinkled like candles.
c. Something made a noise that sounded like hooves on the roof.
d. St. Nick came down the chimney as quiet as a mouse.
e. His helpers were as tiny as dolls.
f. They climbed the Christmas tree like squirrels.